

EPICS

by Art Ross

They've changed since "The Ten Commandments," but today's epics still captivate audiences with intriguing plots, action-packed adventure and casts of thousands.

Epic fantasies, enjoying a healthy resurgence on today's movie screens, are thriving on modern audiences' needs to escape from the daily pressures of life. People are looking for heroes to identify with in films that offer magic illusion, erotic passion and action-packed adventure. Moviegoers wish to be swept out of today's dreary reality, and into the fascinating unknown and unreal. In the days of the silents, they did it by sharing the cliff-hanging thrills of *The Perils of Pauline*.

And though epics have changed from the back-lot offerings of the Twenties and Thirties, to the new epics touting cinematic special effects today, the heroes, the adventure and the magic remain larger than life.

The same desires that caused yesterday's moviegoer to flock to *Gone With the Wind*, are now causing today's audiences to scramble to see modern epic blockbusters. One of these, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, owes its specific inspiration to the serials of the Thirties and the Forties. It is a comic strip-type spectacle, in which the archeologist hero (Harrison Ford), endures outlandish thrills and spills while battling Hitler's agents (circa 1936) in the quest for an ancient Egyptian artifact.

Another of today's major epics is Mel Brooks' *History of the World—Part 1*. With Brooks at the controls, audiences rightly expect a movie that's more hysterical than historical. And the fact is that he plays everything for laughs, from the Last Supper to the French Revolution. Brooks' philosophy is that he wants people to leave the theatre with a sense of joy about their own lives, a feeling of exhilaration at being alive in this particular moment of history. His way of making us feel good is by showing us that in the past, things were a lot worse.

Another successful epic is *Dragonslayer*, a serious fairytale about magic and terror in the Dark Ages. The principal attraction in this spectacle is a forty-foot dragon

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with a weakness for young ladies. Then there is *Clash of the Titans*, a Greek mythological piece filmed with animated special effects in a process called Dynamation. The cast includes such notables as Laurence Olivier as Zeus, Maggie Smith as Thetis and Ursula Andress as Aphrodite.

The next epic fantasy blockbuster is *Superman II*, based on the famous comic strip, but spiced up with some sex (Superman succumbs to the charms of his newswoman girlfriend). Fortunately, at the denouncement, he opts for abstinence, regains his super-strength, and saves the world from a trio of super-villains almost (but not quite) as invincible as he is.

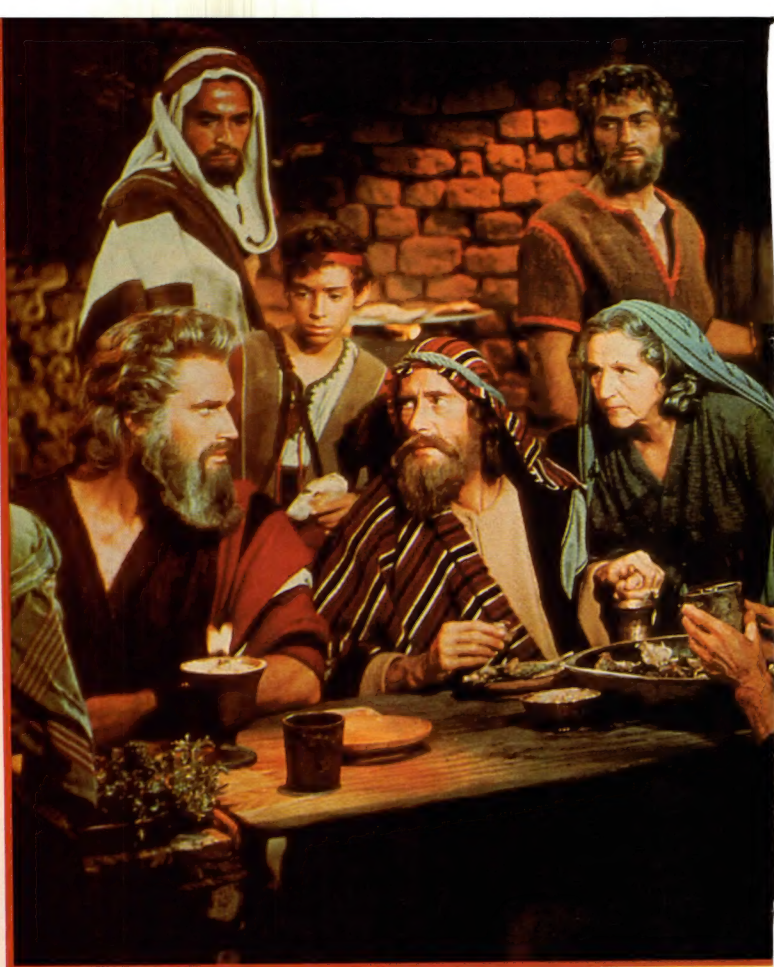
The commercial cinema had been in existence only a short time before filmmakers realized they had the power to cinematically recreate history, re-live epic battles, rebuild the pyramids of Egypt, part the Red Sea and engulf Pompeii in volcanic ash all over again. The best epics have been the work of men imbued with the power to create spectacles of breathtaking splendor in films of awesome conception.

The Italians were the first to film epics. Inspired by the ruins of Ancient Rome and Pompeii, they inevitably looked to historical spectacle for subject matter. Arturo Ambrosio won international acclaim with the first of several versions of *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1908). The first motion picture epic/spectacular seen in America was Enrico Guazzoni's nine-reel, two-hour production of *Quo Vadis* (1912). Viewers were awed by the elaborate sets, the Bacchanalian feasts, the masses of extras, the incredible scenes of Rome burning, and the ruthlessness of the arena scenes in which Christians were attacked and killed by lions.

Despite its numerous epic delights, *Quo Vadis* was very static, and it took Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1913), a story of the Punic Wars, to show the true potential of the epic form. Pastrone made his camera move and enabled his audiences to accompany the camera through palaces, into temples and across landscapes.

Among the American filmmakers who were influenced by the Italian epics was D. W. Griffith. Griffith advanced the genre tremendously by changing the shape of the movie screen from nearly square to a much more vertical shape, thereby allowing room for his great vistas of ancient temples and palaces. It was the Italian epic which inspired him to move from the small-scale, intimate viewpoint, and think big. All of the editing, lighting and composition techniques which Griffith had developed in his early films, and which made him one of the greatest innovators in the history of the movies, were linked to his splendid new vision of the cinema.

The first American film epic was Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a monumental drama of the Civil War and



its aftermath. It covered Lee's surrender and Lincoln's assassination; the exploitation of the newly freed Negroes; the avarice of the Northern politicians; the rise of the Ku Klux Klan; the hatred engendered by racism; and the eventual salvation of the Old South.

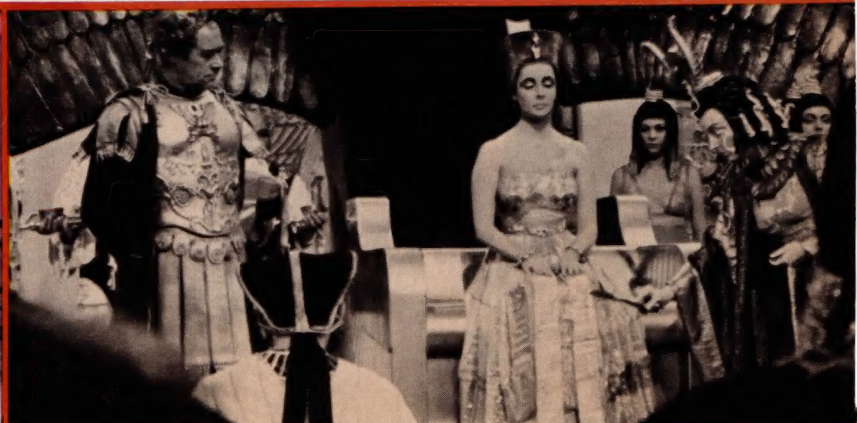
His next film was *Intolerance* (1916), subtitled "Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages." Utilizing huge sets, lavish costumes, war machinery, racing chariots and surging crowd scenes, Griffith in this film set standards for authenticity and moral purpose which no epic since has bettered, and which few have matched. Years ahead of his time, the film was a commercial failure at the box office.

Griffith's most formidable rival was Cecil B. DeMille, who was so impressed with the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments, that he brought it to the screen twice. In 1923 he made a silent version using his customary technique of the sermonizing flashback, with a new twist. The film began with an elaborate retelling of the flight of the Israelites from Egypt and the engulfing of Pharaoh's pursuing army. This was followed by a modern story recounting the consequences of breaking the ten rules in the Twentieth century.

Spartacus



Cleopatra





The Ten Commandments

The 1956 version of the movie, starring Charlton Heston, made on a much vaster scale and in color and VistaVision, told only the biblical story, leaving contemporary movie-goers to figure out the moral. The film was lavish, and full of special effects, such as the Pillar of Fire, the parting of the Red Sea, and the delivery of God's words to Moses on Mount Sinai.

DeMille attempted to top his first version of *The Ten Commandments* by filming another biblical epic, *The King of Kings* (1927), which dealt with the life of Christ. His reverence for the subject was so great he would not allow the actors who played Christ and his Disciples to drink or use profanity on the set. This film demonstrated DeMille's facility for involving the camera (and therefore the audience) physically, by means of dramatic editing, lush backgrounds and exotic costuming.

A number of other DeMille productions are also worthy of inclusion in the "epic" category. *The Sign of the Cross* (1933) was a pseudo-biblical melodrama of Christians seeking religious freedom in Rome under Emperor Nero. One of its most extravagant moments was the scene in

which the lovely Queen Peppaea (Claudette Colbert) leisurely swims in a bathtub filled with asses' milk.

Cleopatra (1934), another sumptuously mounted drama, again stars Miss Colbert, this time as the resplendent Queen of Egypt who is desired by both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony. In *The Crusades* (1935), DeMille turned to medieval history. With his usual flair for the spectacular, he mixed historical fact with romantic fiction to tell the story of Richard the Lion-Hearted and the Holy Wars.

Northwest Mounted Police (1940), DeMille's first venture into Technicolor, demonstrated his mastery of the process. Emphasizing action, atmosphere and spectacle, he effectively used a variety of colorful characters to display the turmoil of primitive passions amid the deep forests, roaring streams and lofty mountains of the Canadian Northwest. Also in color, his *Samson and Delilah* (1949), based on only a few paragraphs of the Old Testament, was a popular blend of spectacle, sex and sadism, starring the beautiful Hedy Lamarr as Delilah. Its imagery brought back the baroque sense of luxury of another era.

DeMille was certainly not the only filmmaker to find inspiration in the biblical stories. Hundreds of films, many reaching epic proportions, have been based on well-known episodes from both the Old and New Testaments. Two such films from the silent era were *Queen of Sheba* (1921) and *Sodom and Gomorrah*, both box-office successes. Michael Curtiz's *Noah's Ark* (1928), was notable for its glass shots of the Tower of Babel superimposed on live action, but was not a big hit because of ill-timing; it was released during the big switch from silents to sound movies.

A later biblical epic, *The Robe* (1953), based on Lloyd C. Douglas' novel, was the first film in CinemaScope. It was a fictional account of the fate of a number of persons who came into the possession of the garment taken from Christ at the crucifixion. The producers, Twentieth Century-Fox, took a chance in pouring millions into this extravaganza, and the gamble paid off.

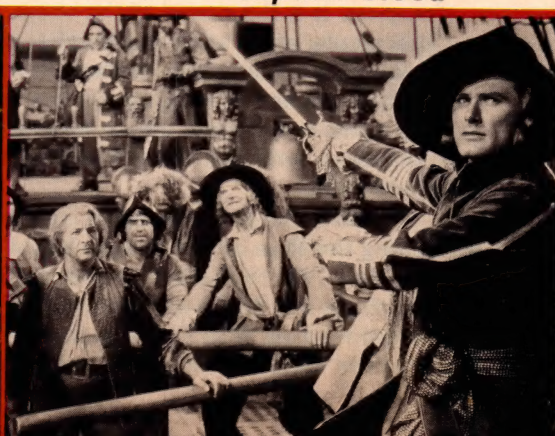
The Egyptian (1954), produced by Twentieth Century-Fox in CinemaScope, was a pseudo-historical biblical spectacle dealing with sex and religion in the time of the pharaohs. The plot concerns a young doctor who tries to fathom the riddle of life after a fickle woman scorns him. After much suffering and exile, he becomes a believer in the one God and attains the spiritual peace he is seeking.

Sex goddesses Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner also got their chance to star in biblical tales. In *Salome* (1953), Hayworth danced to save the life of John the Baptist. In *The Prodigal* (1955), Turner was the evil High Priestess of the Temple of Love. The public stayed away from both of these examples of Hollywood "kitsch."

The Robe

Mutiny on the Bounty

Captain Blood





Barabbas (1962), a grandiose but lengthy film made in Italy by Dino DeLaurentiis, was pictorially striking but heavy-handed and lacking in personal drama. On the other hand, George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), was probably the most ambitious biblical epic thus far filmed. Nearly four hours long, this massively scenic Passion Play was given huge proportions on the Ultra Panavision 70mm screen. Among its highlights were the scenes of the Wise Man being guided by the star to Bethlehem; the period of Jesus' temptation; the curing of the lame man Uriah, and the emergence of Lazarus from the tomb. The all-star cast included Max von Sydow as Jesus, Telly Savalas as Pontius Pilate, Jose Ferrar as Herod, and Charlton Heston as John the Baptist.

De Laurentiis' production of *The Bible* (1966) is remembered less for its epic qualities than for the colossal thinking behind it. De Laurentiis had originally planned to make a nine-hour epic extravaganza covering the first six books of the Old Testament, each book to be handled by a leading director. John Huston ended up directing the entire film, which covered only Genesis, and ran just short of three hours. The biblical epic to end all epics has yet to be made.

Another major source of the epic film has been the crumbling of civilizations, the death-throes of empires. It is the drama of the subject, rather than the spectacular effect achieved, that has given strength to the many films dealing with Ancient Rome. The reason the Roman Empire has inspired so many epics is that its story has a two-fold theme: the crumbling of an empire contrasted with the rise of a new world religion, Christianity.

Probably the two best epics inspired by man's faith during the time of Christ were MGM's two versions of *Ben Hur*—the 1926 silent version starring Ramon Novarro and Francis X. Bushman, and William Wyler's Academy Award-winning 1959 CinemaScope version which starred Charlton Heston. The story concerned a young

The Charge of the Light Brigade

contemporary of Jesus whose fortunes paralleled those of the Messiah. Today, both versions are remembered best for the famous chariot race.

Other epics built around the Roman Empire were the several versions of *Quo Vadis* (1912, 1925, 1951) and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1907, 1935, 1960); Enrico Guazzoni's Italian silent film, *Messalina* (1923); Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), produced by its star, Kirk Douglas; and Samuel Bronston's production of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), which encompassed the reign of Marcus Aurelius and that of his son and successor, Commodus.

And of course there was Twentieth Century-Fox's extravagant production of *Cleopatra* (1963), starring Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra, Richard Burton as Marc Antony and Rex Harrison as Julius Caesar. Drawing crowds more for its famous cast than for the strength and drama of the production itself, this expensive film dramatized the story of the Nile Queen and her two Roman lovers at the time of Roman Internecine struggles.

Epic heroes have also come from Greek legend, as exemplified by such films as Warners' made-in-Italy CinemaScope version of *Helen of Troy* (1955), based on Homer's Iliad; Paramount's Italian-made, English-dubbed *Ulysses* (1955), based on Homer's Odyssey, and the Italian-made *Hercules* (1957), starring Steve Reeves.

The first grand scale Western epic of the talkie era was Fox' *The Big Trail* (1930), directed by Raoul Walsh and notable for giving John Wayne his first important role. The story of pioneers and their struggle across the American plains, deserts and mountains, the film's spectacular high spot was a terrific rain storm that nearly drowned the large cast.

Another outstanding Western epic of the early Thirties was RKO's *Cimarron* (1931). A vivid dramatization of Edna Ferber's sprawling, exciting best seller, the film traced Oklahoma's settlement by homesteaders to the time it became a state. A memorable highlight was the

scene in which masses of people raced madly over millions of acres of rough terrain—in wagon, on horseback, and by shank's mare—each fervently seeking a bit of land to call his own. **Cimarron**, whose epic sweep was in the tradition of the old-time Western, won the 1930-31 Academy Award for best picture.

Impressive productionwise but unsuccessful at the box office was the Universal epic, **Sutter's Gold** (1936), in which veteran director James Cruze dealt with the same time period he had focused on in **The Covered Wagon**. A lavish adventure drama blending fact and fiction, it depicted the discovery of gold in 1848 on the vast California properties of a Swiss immigrant named Johann August Sutter (played brilliantly by Edward Arnold).

In MGM's **Northwest Passage** (1939), director King Vidor brought Kenneth Roberts' rousing novel of Americana vividly to life. The film dramatized the adventures of colonial rangers (led by Spencer Tracy as Colonel Rodgers), as they sought to open the seaway north of America.

United Artists' **Red River** (1948), directed by Howard Hawks, was a Western epic of grandeur and scope frequently mentioned in the same category as **The Covered Wagon** and **Cimarron**. The story covered the conflict between a tough-minded, rugged individualist (John Wayne) who singlehandedly builds a cattle empire in the unbroken reaches of Texas, and his foster son (Montgomery Clift), a gentler but equally rugged leader. The film was climaxed by a grueling cattle drive to open the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Kansas in 1865.

Republic's **Man of Conquest** (1939), an epic on Texas Independence, was a tribute to American hero Sam Houston (played by rugged Richard Dix). It traced his life from the battle of Horseshoe Bend, where he became a lifelong friend of Andrew Jackson, through Houston's Presidency of Texas following the defeat of Mexico. The same period was covered by United Artists' **The Alamo** (1960), but in this epic, history was rearranged somewhat by John Wayne, who produced, directed and starred as Colonel Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier. The climax was a spectacular if less-than-accurate representation of the last battle for the Alamo.

Among the most massive productions ever to depict the West was MGM's **How the West Was Won** (1963), a king-size epic in Cinerama utilizing the talents of three veteran directors—John Ford, George Marshall and Henry Hathaway. It purported to portray the conquest of the American frontier while covering the adventures of a pioneering family. Replete with Civil War fighting, railroad-building, a buffalo stampede, a train holdup by desperadoes and an attack on a wagon train by Indians, the film and enough plot twists to fill a dozen movies. The all-star cast included John Wayne, Henry Fonda, James Stewart and Gregory Peck, with a narration by Spencer Tracy.

War, always great epic material, has been an important factor in the progress and development of the cinema. One of the greatest war epics of all time, in terms of expense, entertainment value and financial success, was MGM's Civil War super-drama, **Gone With the Wind** (1939), produced by David O. Selznick. This colossal film set box office records around the world in its initial roadshow bookings, and continues to do so in its frequent reissue engagements (with

reprocessed Technicolor prints enlarged from 35mm to 70mm). Now in its fifth decade, the film still casts a magical spell over audiences, retaining all its epic strength and sweeping the spectator along with the majesty of its theme of reconstruction and rebirth after the devastation of war. Its bigger than life characters have taken on the added dimension of folk heroes. Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) is a passionate, vibrant and confused human being, a vivid embodiment of selfishness and sentiment. Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) is a rich, colorful and romantic rascal in the heroic picaresque vein. Ashley Wilkes (Leslie Howard) and Melanie (Olivia de Havilland) truly exemplify nobility in its ideal.

On the other side, Rex Ingram's anti-war epic, **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse** (1921), was notable for its realistic battle scenes and strongly patriotic overtones, but its huge success was due primarily to the electric presence of Rudolph Valentino in a substantial role.

Universals' **All Quiet on the Western Front** (1930), based on Erich Maria Remarque's great anti-war novel, made the most uncompromising pacifist statement ever dramatized on the screen. With a poignancy that was almost unbearable, it portrayed the brutality of war through the gradual demoralization and eventual death of a unit of young German troops. The film received the Academy Award as best picture.

Twentieth Century-Fox's **The Longest Day** (1962) was a quasi-documentary, realistically recreating the events of June 6, 1944, when the Allies cracked open Hitler's Fortress Europe by establishing beachheads on the Normandy coast. And Columbia's **The Guns of Navarone** (1961), an out-and-out melodrama emphasizing

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Epics

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adventure and heroism, centered around saboteurs who secretly land on a Nazi-held Greek island and blow up two critical, sea-commanding guns.

With *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), director David Lean added a new ingredient to the epic film—the psychological hero or anti-hero. This type of hero is a passive man who spends almost as much time in thought as he does in action.

In *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Alec Guinness played the anti-hero, Colonel Nicholson—the stiff-lipped, strictly-by-the-book commander of a troop of British soldiers captured by the Japanese. Nicholson agrees to build a bridge to prove his men's superiority over their captors. He puts so much of himself into the construction, he loses sight of the fact that his bridge will benefit the enemy. When he spots a group of British saboteurs about to blow up the bridge, his half-mad effort to prevent its destruction results in pure carnage. The bridge is destroyed, and all the principals are annihilated.

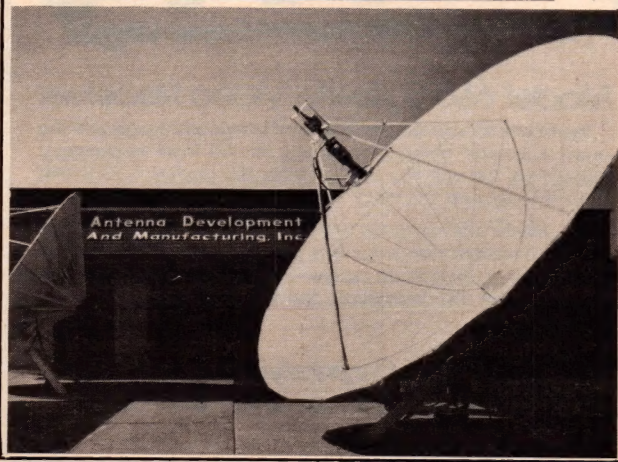
In *Lawrence of Arabia*, we are presented with the dichotomy of a peace-loving man who is ultimately responsible for the shedding of much blood—an aloof scholar, forced to be a man of action. A tortured, complex personality, Thomas Edward Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) found himself caught up in an exciting moment in history—the toppling of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of new kingdoms. Because he happened to be in the right place at the right time, he became a hero virtually by default. A fine film with a huge cast, this was one of the great epics of the Sixties.

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The Empire Strikes Back

Nineteenth-century India was the setting for several other such adventure epics. Paramount's *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) was a spectacularly exciting account of the gallant band of fighting men who guarded the Northern frontier of England's empire in India. In the finest Kipling tradition, it dealt with the dashing stuff of border patrols, guerrilla warfare, Afghan torture methods, and the honor of the regiment. Warner's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), loosely suggested by Tennyson's poem, was a virile and picturesque saga of blood and empire—an unabashed testimonial to the courage and ferocity of British soldiers in far-flung outposts.

United Artists' *Khartoum* (1966), with its desert heroes and cast of thousands, recreated the saga of the valorous General Charles (Chinese) Gordon in the Egyptian Sudan. During the last part of the nineteenth century, he tried to evacuate the British and the Egyptians from the Nile city of Khartoum when it was besieged by the Mahdi, a fanatical desert leader.

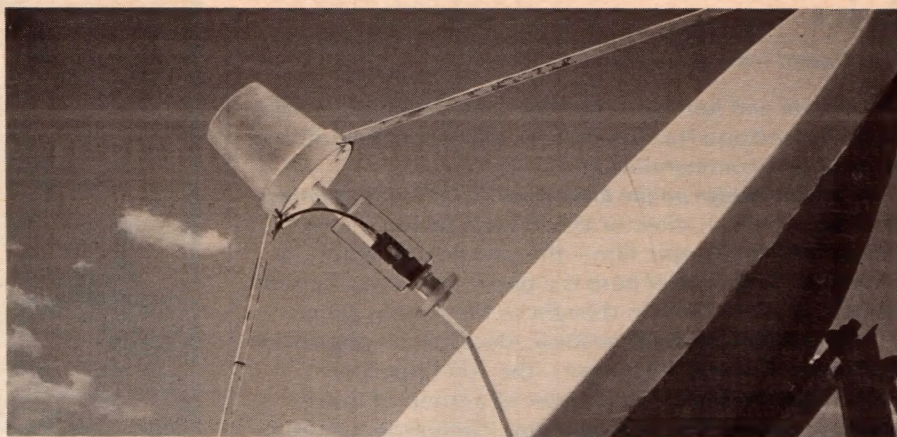
MGM's *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), a British naval epic, won a well-deserved Academy Award as best picture. Based on the popular novel of the same name, it depicted the true story of the English ship H.M.S. *Bounty* and the successful mutiny of part of her crew, which took place in 1787 in the South Seas. The film detailed the motivations for the mutiny led by Master's Mate Fletcher Christian (Clark Gable) against the sadistic Captain Bligh (Charles Laughton), who is forced off the ship into a small boat and miraculously finds his way to the Dutch West Indies. One of the mutineers, Midshipman Roger Byam, returns to England and is given a court-martial during which the barbaric naval code is exposed. The film ends with the band of mutineers seeking sanctuary on Pitcairn Island.

Several epics made in the Fifties and Sixties took their inspiration from Russian history. *The Brothers Karmazov* (1958) was an absorbing and exciting retelling by MGM of Dostoyevsky's classic tragedy. The story of greed, hatred and vengeance among a monstrously profligate father and his four sons, the film had philosophical overtones so typical of Dostoyevsky's work.

Doctor Zhivago (1965), based on the Boris Pasternak novel, is the story of love and deprivation during the Russian Revolution. Also produced by MGM, this lengthy epic was filmed in Spain, where sites were found similar to Russian terrain. The film was strikingly effective in creating a strong sense of the harshness of Russian winters, especially in the hero's long trek across snow-covered Siberia.

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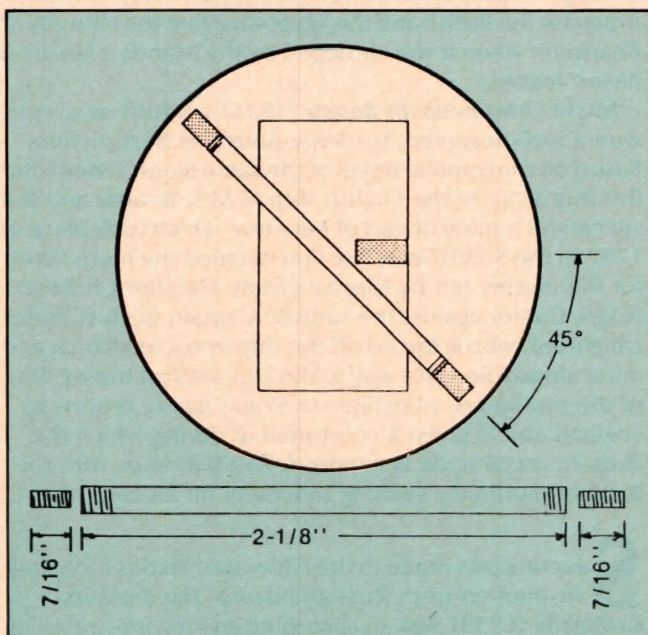
What looks like a flowerpot is actually a protective cap for the rotator.

Converting A Linear To A Circular Feed (to receive Russian and other international satellite signals)

The September 1980 issue of *COOP'S Satellite Digest* published instructions for converting a linear (vertical or horizontal) feed to a right hand circular to increase the signal strength received from the Russian Molniya and other international satellites. A complete reprint of this article is available from Chaparral Communications, P.O. Box 832, Los Altos, CA 94022, but we have condensed the instructions here to indicate how simple the job is, if your

panying diagram. Be certain it is lodged between the inner walls of the feed pipe, 1¼" back from its mouth or opening at an angle of 45 degrees with the horizontal. Turn the plastic rod until the metal end pieces have wedged the rod into the opening as positioned.

According to Bob Cooper, this modification will increase the strength from right hand circular polarized signals by 2 to 3 dB. ☆



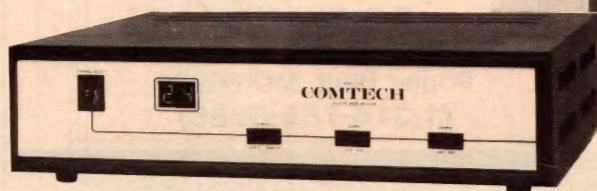
antenna has a Chaparral scalar loaded feedhorn system.

The modification was originally developed by Taylor Howard of Stanford University, who took a 29-cent plastic BIC pen barrel and cut it down to 2½" long. He then tapped the barrel at both ends with a 12"X24" thread so that he could screw into each end of the barrel a 7/16" length of similarly threaded aluminum or brass rod, 3/16" in diameter.

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The American version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1956), produced in Italy by Dino DeLaurentiis for Paramount, was a vast Technicolor panorama of human drama and military spectacle, over three hours long. King Vidor directed the mighty scenes of clashing armies and Napoleon's retreat from Moscow as vividly as he had filmed World War I in *The Big Parade*, more than thirty years earlier.

Not to be outdone, the Russian version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1967) was made by Sergei Bondarchuk over a five-year period at a reported cost of \$100 million. It originally ran more than seven hours, but an hour was cut from the running time for U.S. showing. Dubbed in English, it represents a milestone in moviemaking—the ultimate in bringing great epic literature to the screen. Excellently cast and exquisitely filmed in Russia, Tolstoy's well-loved characters are truly larger than life.

Two other elaborate historical epics were inspired by the French Revolution. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) is the story of a drunken lawyer (played by Ronald Colman), with no purpose in life, who suddenly awakens to responsibility and ultimately pays with his life for aiding victims of the Reign of Terror. The film effectively captures the sense of fatalism and moral necessity which can drive a man to self-destruction. *Marie Antionette* (1938) was the opulent biography of a woefully ineffectual eighteenth-century Queen of France. Norma Shearer caught the essence of the victim of the revolution as the story recounts her life from an Austrian princess to the doomed queen of a crumbling kingdom.

Still other epic heroes have come from history, as in Abel Gance's French-made silent masterpiece, *Napoleon* (1927). But there is probably no more splendid image in

the epic genre than that of Spain's national hero in Samuel Bronston's production of *El Cid* (1961). It is a heart-stopping moment when Charlton Heston as the dead Cid, bound upright in his horse's saddle, gallops from sight for his last ride, into glorious legend.

One of the main forerunners of science-fiction epics was *Metropolis*, made in Germany by Fritz Lang in 1926. In this superscientific utopia (set in the year 2100) where technology runs rampant, mankind is shackled by its own machines and inventions. Finally the workers revolt against the domination of the machines, the moral being that the brains (capital) and the hands (labor) fail when the heart (love) does not work with them. Brilliantly innovative and masterful in its use of special effects, *Metropolis* is regarded today as the inspiration of such current science fiction epics as *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *The Empire Strikes Back*.

There is no question that the epic films of the Seventies and Eighties, most notably the science fiction epics, though relying on the sumptuous special effects made possible by modern technology, have still retained the essence of the earlier epics. The heroes and heroines continue to demonstrate qualities of strength, endurance, moral purpose, beauty and power, and they still act and react with grandeur.

So although we have traded chariots for spaceships and ancient soil for futuristic settings, epics are still satisfying the escapist need in all of us. The films are still whisking us off to places unknown, carrying us through spectacular adventures, and inviting us to walk among a cast of thousands. ☆

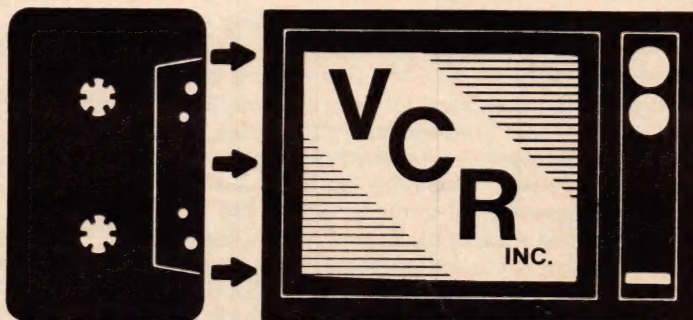
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